



State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

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Improving Women's Electoral Chances through an Evidence-Based Approach: Women's Political Participation — Post-Election Issues

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In Brief 2016/41

This is the last In Brief of a series of eight developed as background papers for a three-day workshop titled 'Improving women's electoral chances through an evidence-based approach', hosted by the Centre for Democratic Institutions and the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program at the Australian National University in Canberra, June 2016. The In Briefs are designed to accompany the [workshop synthesis report](#).

Support for female electoral candidates in Melanesia must continue after the election, for both successful and unsuccessful candidates. This briefing note will firstly examine the issues that women entering politics after an election must navigate. Then, it will look at post-election issues for candidates who are not elected, in terms of additional challenges that may arise due to their past political activity.

Successful Candidates — Helping Them Stay in Politics

For those few women who are elected to Pacific parliaments, preconceived notions of what a female politician should be can constitute a significant hurdle. Female politicians are often expected to be less corrupt than their male counterparts. This is linked to the commonly cited argument for increased women's representation that it leads to good governance and lower levels of corruption (Dollar et al. 1999). While the perceived link between good governance and increased women's representation has been challenged, the perception remains. Male politicians are often assumed to be corrupt (Corbett 2015), while the expectation on women is that they are a 'better' class of politician. The behaviour of female members of parliament (MPs) in the region is heavily scrutinised online and in the media. Former Papua New Guinea MP Josephine Abaijah (1991:306) wrote that her constituents 'put me on a pedestal and said that, being a woman, I was beyond the corruptions and foibles that afflicted many men'. While this perception can be an advantage for women in earning

the trust of voters, for those who fall off the pedestal the consequences can be worse than for men involved in scandal.

Once elected, women representatives can find themselves in precarious positions, often with slim majorities and seen as 'easy targets' for electoral petitions or challenges to re-election. In Melanesia in particular, turnover is high in elections. In Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, historically around 50 per cent of incumbent politicians lost their seats every election (Morgan 2005). Even in countries with lower turnover, female politicians can face difficulties in winning re-election. Many female MPs — and male MPs — elected in the region do not serve more than one parliamentary term. This leads to an absence of consistency in terms of women's representation, and means that after the steep learning curve of the first term in politics, women are often unable to capitalise on their new understanding of parliamentary politics.

For a newly elected MP, the parliamentary processes and procedures can be extremely hard to navigate. Support in this area is of high importance. Women can be disadvantaged through a lack of access to informal 'old boys' networks through which newer male parliamentarians are mentored in their early years. Building linkages with more senior female politicians and male allies, retired politicians or senior bureaucrats could be one method to establish similar networks for new female MPs for longer-term support in navigating legislative procedures, budget processes and the parliamentary context.

A ministerial portfolio is one way to effectively pursue substantive policy goals. Women are under-represented at the executive level in the Pacific, and where women are represented in cabinet, they are often found in portfolios that are considered 'soft' or less prestigious, such as education, health or social welfare. Only 7.2 per cent of cabinet ministers in the region are women. Four Pacific countries currently have all-male cabinets, and no country has more than two female cabinet ministers. There is currently — for the first time — a female head of government of a Pacific state, Hilda Heine

in Marshall Islands, as well as one current deputy head of government, Fiaame Naomi Mata'afa in Samoa.

More than one in three women MPs in the region hold a ministerial position, suggesting that for women who do enter politics, the success rate in obtaining a ministerial portfolio is relatively high. An increase in women's representation more generally, however, would not necessarily translate to an increase in executive-level representation. Women's representation in the executive is especially vulnerable to erosion with changes of government, as the recent case of Kiribati shows us. While in the previous term there were two female ministers (14 per cent), including long-serving Vice-President Teima Onorio, when the newly elected president appointed his cabinet in March he included no women. While there is nevertheless a female presence in most Pacific cabinets, women can be sidelined within political executives when they are given unequal responsibilities or less prestigious portfolios. Furthermore, the highest echelons of executive power, despite some notable advancements after recent elections, remain male dominated.

At the subnational level, where women representatives are elected or appointed to provincial and local-level political institutions, they also face challenges. In Papua New Guinea, the presence of women representatives in local-level government or on District Services Improvement Program committees is crucial given the visibility of women's leadership at this level and the potential influence over service delivery. Female representatives on these entities, however, are often starved of funds, which limits their capacity and legitimacy in these roles. This is a potential entry point for donor programming to improve their access to funds for women in these positions.

Unsuccessful Female Candidates

For female candidates who are not successful in being elected to a political position, additional post-election challenges may arise. They might face repercussions from rival candidates, members of their community or even family members, for contesting. One unsuccessful but high-performing female candidate in Papua New Guinea reported following the election that she was accused of having used sorcery by male candidates who had polled fewer votes than her, and was harassed by their supporters.

Many aspiring female candidates in the region work in public service positions. This presents problems due to the requirement that public servants resign from their positions if they intend to contest an election, usually three to six months beforehand. This is an issue for both female and male aspiring

candidates, but it has been alleged that in some countries it is easier for men to get their public services positions back after an unsuccessful political run than it is for women. Changing eligibility rules, perhaps to take account of time served, could make a possible difference here in encouraging women to stand for election. Some female senior public servants, however, do not see entering politics as an attractive prospect. For many women in leadership positions in the Pacific, public service employment is viewed as more secure, more meritocratic and potentially an area where they can effect more change, than a political career. The transitions for female political aspirants from the public service to politics (and back) is an understudied area that might provide important insight into the pathways to politics for female leaders in the region.

There is also a need to support female candidates who performed well, but did not win, to remain engaged with politics. Evidence suggests that being elected often requires multiple attempts; some male candidates enter their first election with a two- or three-term strategy to win office. An important question is how donor support might be provided to sustain engagement for high-performing female candidates across multiple elections.

Author Notes

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